



News Release

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Drug overdose deaths involving prescription pain meds continue to climb

Resources available to help

OLYMPIA — The number of people dying from an overdose of prescription pain medication is growing in Washington. From 2003 to 2008, the state death rate increased 90 percent. And in 2007, 447 people died; in 2008 it was 505.

There was a similar increase in hospitalizations. The number of drug overdose hospitalizations involving prescription pain medications increased from 572 in 2007 to 646 in 2008.

“Too many people treat these powerful drugs as casual medications,” said State Health Officer Dr. Maxine Hayes. “This stuff isn’t aspirin, and it should be handled with care.”

In Washington, the death rate per 100,000 population for overdose from prescription pain medications was highest in Stevens, Clallam, Spokane, Grant, and Snohomish counties. The death rate for Stevens was 18.6 per 100,000 population compared to 6.8 per 100,000 population in King County.

These types of medications are being prescribed much more often since the late 1990s. With that increase came greater misuse and abuse. From 1995 to 2008, Washington had 17 times more deaths from accidental overdose involving prescription pain medications. These types of deaths have surpassed automobile crashes as the leading cause of injury death in the state for residents ages 35 to 54. There is evidence that the risk of overdose is higher for those on higher doses of pain medication.

Patients with valid prescriptions must be careful with their prescription pain meds — and the need for caution grows with higher doses. It’s important to keep medications in a safe place so others can’t get to them. Always follow the directions and consult with your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns about prescriptions. If you can’t reach your health care

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provider, talk to your pharmacist. Taking these powerful drugs with alcohol, illegal drugs, and other prescription medications can be dangerous — and even deadly — unless done under a doctor's care.

Information for health care providers, parents, and patients is on the Department of Health website. The [Take as Directed](http://www.doh.wa.gov/hsqa/TakeAsDirected/default.htm) (www.doh.wa.gov/hsqa/TakeAsDirected/default.htm) page is a resource to help people learn about this serious issue and help prevent death. It has information for health professionals about how to effectively and safely prescribe these medications. Parents can also find tips to keep their children from abusing prescription drugs, and advice on where they can turn if they think their teen needs help.

Properly dispose of all unused and expired prescription medications. Several drug take-back programs exist across the state. [Find a location](http://www.medicinereturn.com/return-your-medicines/return-your-medicines/return-locations) (www.medicinereturn.com/return-your-medicines/return-your-medicines/return-locations) in your community.

A [brochure has been created for health professionals](http://here.doh.wa.gov/materials/safe-use-of-prescription-pain-medication/33_PainMeds_E10L.pdf) to educate their patients about how to safely use prescription pain medication (http://here.doh.wa.gov/materials/safe-use-of-prescription-pain-medication/33_PainMeds_E10L.pdf). It shows possible signs of an overdose — abnormal vital signs, sleepiness or confusion, and shortness of breath — and what to do when you observe an overdose. The recently passed [Good Samaritan Law](http://www.atg.wa.gov/pressrelease.aspx?&id=25810) allows immunity for anyone who is either experiencing an overdose or witnessing one (www.atg.wa.gov/pressrelease.aspx?&id=25810). Call 9-1-1 to get care as quickly as possible.

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Visit the Washington Department of Health website at http://www.doh.wa.gov for <i>a healthy dose of information</i> .
